

*By Loren Morris, December 3, 2015*

*By Loren Morris, December 3, 2015*



The location of the grapes, the soil where they grow... the way the vines are maintained and the fruit is harvested... the decisions around removing the skins... the type of wooden barrel where the juice will ferment — for Cinder Wines husband and wife founders Joe Schnerr and Melanie Krause, every decision matters.

Their first “nudge” happened in the early 2000s at Washington State University. Joe — having finished his degree in analytical chemistry — and Melanie — having finished hers in biology and Spanish — made the move to the Tri-Cities in Washington, where Joe was offered a job.

“That quickly opened her eyes to winemaking,” Joe said. And more so, the experience to create a wine label of their own.

“Winemaking is about place. Unlike the connectedness of a tech startup, you can’t start a winery just anywhere. There are climates that just can’t produce grapes, and (beyond that) grapes used for wine.”

In 2005, they planted themselves in Boise. Joe began working full-time at Micron, and Melanie worked as a consultant for area wineries while putting into motion the first harvest and production of Cinder Wines.



Once the first season of wine was ready, they just needed people to start drinking it. Joe had a plan.

“One of the ways to get in front of customers was to have our wines poured by the glass at some of the better restaurants in town.” Locals could try the wine, and if they liked it, would become unofficial salesman for the wine with their friends and family.

Four years and a few seasons of winemaking later, business was booming for Cinder Wines. But Joe’s full-time job was gone. Micron was restructuring, he was being let go.

“Up until that point, the paycheck from Micron was our lifeline... our safety net,” says Joe.

But the layoff came at a perfect time.

Melanie had been spearheading the winemaking process, but they needed someone who could market and sell to stores and fine restaurants across Idaho and the region. Joe, having been at Melanie’s side maintaining the business after work and on weekends, knew he’d be perfect for the job. “When I got the news from Micron, it took me about two seconds to decide. To take the leap,” Joe said.

“We realized the paycheck isn’t a safety net, it’s in the way. It was holding us back from growing the company,” Joe says. “We had skin in the game. Once we made the decision, we were too busy to be scared of the risks.”

Joe and Melanie are now celebrating Cinder Wine’s tenth season from its industrial chic headquarters in Garden City, which often raises eyebrows from visitors and friends.

“I remember when I was at Micron and I told the guys where I was working, they said ‘Oh, be careful, that’s a bad neighborhood.’ I grew up in Philadelphia, this isn’t a bad neighborhood,” Joe laughs.

As one of the first wineries to set up shop in Garden City, Cinder Wines has become the unofficial ambassador for the underdog city — offering advice to other wineries and breweries looking to move in.

“I was a big cheerleader for Mike Francis [of Payette Brewery] to start up here.”

The empty warehouses and cheap rents are perfect for what Joe calls the “creative class” to live and start businesses. Joe knows it was a smart decision for Cinder Wines.

“It’s unrealistic to look at somebody ten years ago, like Melanie and I, to do our startup in downtown Boise. That’s where fully matured companies go.”

With Cinder Wines maturing, Joe has the future set on growth. “We’re at about a 6,000 case product right now ... we have the goal to get to 10,000,” Joe says. Getting to 10,000 cases is the “sweet spot” that signals full production potential and thus profitability to support the 10-plus people Cinder Wine employs.

Joe is quick to point out Cinder wine is from Boise, made by Boiseans, but he has a loftier goal: “We want to be the best 10,000 case winery in the country. Not Idaho. Not the Northwest. The country,” proclaims Joe. “It’s a big goal. Might take a generation to do. But we’re going for it.”

